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Writers Dispute Hart Story of Somoza Panthers

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Sen. Gary Hart (D-Colo.), interviewed recently by two magazine writers aboard his campaign plane about Nicaragua's late dictator Anastasio Somoza, is quoted by them as saying:

"I don't know if this is public information but, in the basement of his presidential palace, Somoza kept cages with panthers inside. After dinner, for the entertainment of his guests, he would go downstairs and have a political opponent thrown in there with the panthers."

Morton Kondracke of New Republic magazine and Michael Kramer of New York magazine said they were understandably intrigued with the tale of savagery by Somoza, a strong ally of the United States.

But the story apparently is not true.

"It's quite apocryphal," Richard Millett, a history professor at Southern Illinois University and president of the Midwest Association for Latin American Studies, said in an interview.

"The Somozas were way too smooth for that, especially the old man. They were not brutal dictators until the last year. They were unbelievably corrupt. But corrupt and brutal are not the same things," Millett said.

The two journalists said they reached the same conclusion after interviewing numerous other sources, including former U.S. ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo and several former supporters of Nicaragua's current Sandinista government, which succeeded Somoza.

Kondracke used Hart's comment to illustrate how misinformation clouds the Democratic presidential candidate's views of Central America.

"Someone who believes such things about a ruler propped up by both Republican and Democratic administrations for 20 years might well demand a 'fresh start' in U.S. foreign policy and might well declare ringingly that American boys 'should not be sent to serve as bodyguards for

Latin American dictators,'" Kondracke wrote in the April 9 issue of New Republic.

Kramer said he did not write about the incident because Hart, in a later interview, acknowledged that it might not be true. In the forthcoming issue of New York, Kramer quotes Hart as saying he would have "thought seriously" about moving to overthrow Somoza even though "I'm not a covert operations fan."

Hart, in an interview with The Washington Post, said he had heard about the animal cages from Sandinistas he met while visiting Nicaragua last fall.

"I did not know if it was true or not . . . I just passed the story on to Kondracke. I certainly didn't say I could verify it," he said.

Kondracke and Kramer dispute this account. They said that Hart seemed convinced that the panther story was true and that they were left with the impression he had learned of it while serving on the Senate Select Intelligence Committee.